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ON PAGE 3-C

## Today's book

# Examining espionage in Britain

MI6: BRITISH SECRET INTELLIGENCE SERVICE OPERATIONS, 1909-1945. Nonfiction by Nigel West. Random House. \$16.95.

In 1963, Stanley Lovell, conductor of camouflage and related deception techniques for the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS) during World War II, asserted in his book *Of Spies and Strategems* that "the greatest intelligence system in the world is the British Intelligence Service, called 'Broadway' from its headquarters in London."

Five years later, a onetime undercover informant, businessman Greville Wynne, twice assured his readers in *Contact on Gorky Street* that MI6 "overlooks nothing" in its agent-training regimen.

Well, let us trust that both men are right about matters as they stand today, because this history tells the story of a secret service about as self-contained as an abandoned chicken coop. The pseudonymous author is Rupert Allason, a BBC documentary writer and son of a Conservative member of Parliament.

The book is based heavily on interviews with veterans of "the Firm," all of them now deceased. It is essentially an administrative history of a government bureau, with major attention focused on who staffed which overseas station and when, and who replaced whom in order to report where. Henceforth, probes into Britain's status in that never-ending procedure — the acquisition of intelligence as a weapon of national defense — will find West's book both a bedrock and a challenge.

What they will also find is a sickening saga of inept management, loophole-ridden security and intramural squabbling to the point of paralysis in operations. The intelligence service scored its successes, especially in the Middle East and Sweden. But in telling the story, West has largely chosen to ignore accounts of individual operations, the inclusion of which might have made good reading.

So, for those readers who relish the savory meat and potatoes of an espionage mission, I suggest a couple of memoirs by people whose names surface in MI6: for parachute drops into occupied France, see Maurice Buckmaster's *They Fought Alone* (1959); for the scientific contribution, read Dr. R.V. Jones's *The Wizard War* (1978).

Reviewed by Curtis Carroll Davis, a former member of the OSS who lives in Maryland.